

Message Text

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INFO AMEMBASSY ALGIERS

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY RABAT

AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI

CONFIDENTIAL TUNIS 5458

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR TS

SUBJ: HASSEN BELKHODJA DISCUSSES RECOGNITION OF

SOCIAL DEMOCRATS

1. SUMMARY: MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE HASSEN BELKHODJA INVITED MY WIFE AND ME ON AUGUST 1 TO A LONG LEISURELY AFTERNOON FOR LUNCH AND SWIMMING AT HIS FAMILY HOMESTEAD ON THE SHORE AT RAS DJEBEL NEAR BIZERTE, HIS POLITICAL FIEF. I TOOK THE OCCASION WHEN WE WERE ALONE TO PROVOKE HIM INTO A DISCUSSION OF ONE OF THE CHIEF CURRENT ISSUES OF POLITICAL IMPORTANCE IN TUNISIA TODAY, THE FATE OF THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS' APPLICATION OF JUNE 14 TO BE REGISTERED AS A POLITICAL PARTY. END SUMMARY.

2. I TOLD BELKHODJA THAT I ASSUMED FROM THE RECENT WEEKEND SPEAKING TOURS OF THE DESTOURIAN LEADERS IN THE PROVINCES THAT THE POLITICAL BUREAU HAD PROBABLY DECIDED AGAINST GRANTING RECOGNITION TO THE MOVEMENT OF SOCILA DEMOCRATS (MDS). THE MINISTER AVOIDED GIVING ME A "YES" OR A "NO", INSTEAD HE SAID, "BUT THEY ARE NOT RPT NOT A POLITICAL PARTY. THEY HAVE NO FOLLOWING. THEY HAVE NO PROGRAM.

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IF THEY WERE A SERIOUS PARTY, WE COULD TAKE THEM MORE SERIOUSLY." HE THEN TICKED OFF SOME OF THE STATED OBJECTIVES OF THE MDS IN THE ECONOMIC FIELD WHICH, HE CLAIMED, WERE MERE PARAPHRASES OF LONG-ESTABLISHED PSD GOALS. AS OF NOW, HE SIAD, THEY ARE WHAT THEY HAVE BEEN FOR THE PAST YEAR, "A TINY GROUP OF TUNISOIS LAWYERS AND PROFESSORS WHO HAVE FAILED TO ATTRACT ANY SUPPORT OF CONSEQUENCE".

3. I TOLD BELHODJA THAT, NEVERTHELESS, IT WAS MY UNDER-STANDING THAT UNDER THE CONSTITUTION IT WOULD BE HARD TO DENY RECOGNITION TO THE MDS OR ANY OTHER GROUP WHO WISHED TO FUNCTION AS A PARTY. HE SEEMED PUZZLED AT MY REMARK AND NOT TO HAVE THOUGHT OF THE ISSUE AS A CONSTITUTIONAL ONE, BUT HE AGREED THERE WAS NO LEGAL HINDRANCE TO THE FORMATION OF ANY POLITICAL PARTY BY ANY GROUP EXCEPT THE COMMUNISTS (OUTLAWED IN 1963), YET HE CONTENDED THAT THE NATIONAL INTEREST SHOULD REQUIRE THAT NOT JUST ANY GROUP BE ALLOWED TO CALL ITSELF A PARTY. THERE SHOULD BE SOME REQUIRED PROOF THAT TH ORGANIZERS DEMONSTRATE THAT THEY HAVE THE NATIONAL INTEREST AT HEART, ARE NOT SUPPORTED BY FOREIGN SOURCES AND HAVE A Viable STRUCTURE, A SUBSTANTIAL MEMBERSHIP AND A PLATFORM. HE ASKED ME WHETHER I HAD SPOKEN WITH ANY MDS PERSONALITIES LATELY. I TOLD HIM I HAD HAD HALF A DOZEN SESSIONS OVER THE PAST SEVEN OR EIGHT MONTHS WITH AHMED MESTIRI AND OTHER MDS LEADERS, ONE AS RECENTLY AS TWO OR THREE WEEKS AGO. DID I BELIEVE THEY HAD ANY SUB-STANTIAL FOLLOWING, HE THEN ASKED. I SAID THAT, TO BE PERFECTLY HONEST, I WOULD HAVE TO CONFESS THAT MDS SUPPORT DID NOT SEEM TO ME TO BE VERY SUBSTANTIAL AND SEEMED CHIEFLY CONFINED TO THE TUNIS AREA. I FELT, HOWEVER, THAT IN TIME THE MDS' TWO NEWSPAPERS MIGHT WELL ATTRACT A WIDER FOLLOWING FOR THEM AND THAT TIME WOULD TELL. "EH, VOILA*", HE EXPLAINED, "THAT'S PRECISELY MY POINT." WE THEN PASSED

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TO OTHER TOPICS OF CURRENT INTEREST BEING REPORTED (NOTAL) IN SEPTELS.

4. COMMENT: FROM THIS REGRETTABLY INCONCLUSIVE EXCHANGE I DISTILLED A FEELING THAT NO FINAL DECISION HAS BEEN REACHED YET BY THE DESTOURIAN LEADERSHIP ON THE RECOGNITION OF THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS AS A POLITICAL PARTY. BELKHODJA, WHO HAS ALWAYS DISPLAYED A KNACK FOR BEING ON THE WINNING SIDE OF INTR-PARTY CONTROVERSIES, SEEMS PERSONALLY TO LEAN AGAINST RECOGNITION BUT, CHARACTERISTICALLY, LEAVES HIMSELF AN "OUT" AND WILL WAIT TO SEE HOW THE WIND BLOWS, PARTICULARLY AFTER THE PRESIDENT RETURNS TO TUNIS FROM PARIS TOWARD THE END OF THIS MONTH.

MULCAHY

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